



60 HOURS IN THE BREACH

by Captain Matthew W. Kennedy and First Lieutenant McKinley C. Wood

“CONTACT TANK!!” screamed the lead tank gunner of 3d Platoon, Alpha Company, as the Abrams M1A1 Main Battle Tank (MBT) crested the sand-capped intervisibility line. The contact report surged through the platoon internal radio net like a bolt of lightning. A few seconds later, the entire platoon transitioned from movement to maneuver as all four tanks formed a firing line. The enemy, two T-72s in a low sand dune, was only 1,000 meters away with their main guns trained on the platoon, seconds away from firing.

“FIRE!” ordered the platoon leader to his tank commanders. After the volley fire of the 120mm cannons, the kill light of the opposing force began to flash and the platoon continued their movement to the enemy’s main defensive belt.

This is how Task Force (TF) 2d Battalion, 69th Armored Regiment (2-69 Armor) spent the summer of 2002. For 6 months, the soldiers of TF 2-69 Armor endured sand storms with winds up to 35 knots, temperatures reaching 150 degrees, and long multiple integrated laser engagement system (MILES) battles with other U.S. units in an effort to master the Panther rules of combat:

- See the enemy before he sees you.
- Make contact with the smallest element possible.
- Fire distribution and control.

Unknown to the majority of the battalion’s soldiers, 5 months later their country would call on them to use the skills and lessons learned from the Kuwaiti desert to dispose of a brutal dictator and free a tortured people.

See The Enemy Before He Sees You

On the morning of 5 April 2003, after nearly 15 days of continuous combat operations, Alpha Company received the order to establish Objective Montgomery — a blocking position east of a bridge northwest of Baghdad. The Panther TF set up several blocking positions during the course of the war and became the subject matter experts on the tactical task of block. To the soldiers of TF Panther, the mission of block meant they were not the main effort of the 3d Infantry Division attack into Baghdad.

At 0530 on 6 April, TF Panther began their movement to conduct a forward-passage-of-lines with 3d Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment (3/7 Cavalry) to establish the locking position that lay over 40 kilometers away.

Once TF 2-69 Armor passed the main body elements of the Spartan Brigade, 2d Brigade, 3d Infantry, the only friendly forces in front of TF 2-69 Armor along Highway 1 was a cavalry platoon of 3/7 Cavalry. As the lead company of TF Panther traveled Highway 1, evidence of previous battles was clearly visible in the destroyed armored personnel carriers (APCs), tanks, artillery, and other vehicles. Finally, the lead platoon, the same one that led the desert MILES battles the previous summer, made visual contact with the cavalry checkpoint. As TF Panther passed the checkpoint, the cavalry soldiers offered cheers and smiles to their brothers of TF 2-69 Armor as remnants of the Hamarabi Armored Division (Re-

publican Guard) and the Fayedeen Military Guerrilla Forces lay before them.

The lead element of TF Panther focuses on Panther rule of combat 1: win visual contact. To win first contact, everyone in the unit must understand where they are looking for the enemy. Assigning everyone a sector of the battlespace to conduct their scans accomplishes this requirement. Once the battlespace is completely covered by friendly optics, visual contact will be won.

First contact was won when the lead tank spotted a uniformed Republican Guard soldier walking out of a store with his weapon slung nonchalantly across his chest. The enemy soldier began walking toward friendly tanks. The lead tank’s tank commander shouted, *“CONTACT TROOPS, LEFT,”* and began to engage the enemy. As soon as the gunner opened fire with his M240 coaxial machine gun, enemy troops poured into the streets from the adjacent buildings. It was too late for the Iraqi soldiers. Since we won first contact, the enemy had to react to our advances; this gave us control of the battlefield. While the Bradley (M2A2) and Abrams (M1A1), traveling in column formation, continued to scan for Iraqi military targets, the TF commander ordered the air liaison officer (ALO) to coordinate for close air support (CAS).

Make Contact With The Smallest Element Possible

As the TF pierced the defenses of the enemy, the Republican Guard soldiers focused on the lead elements of the TF. This

was not done by mistake, but rather by design. The second Panther rule of combat — make contact with the smallest element possible — allows the TF commander to maneuver his remaining combat units into position and destroy the enemy quickly and effectively. In the case of the attack to Objective Montgomery, the TF commander fixed the enemy with ground-based direct fire while he coordinated direct fire from the air, which was delivered by A-10 Thunderbolt IIs.



"CONTACT TANK!!" screamed the gunner in the lead tank of the column. This drill was not just to announce a specific enemy force's presence to the tank commander, it was broadcasted over the radio net because it serves a very important purpose. After someone gives the warning of an enemy in the area, the enemy's location and disposition is then broadcasted over the radio net.

David Leeson, DMN Photo Staff

"CONTACT T-72, LEFT SIDE! CONTACT P-C

RIGHT SIDE! TROOPS!" The American tip of the spear began to pierce the iron-clad front of the Iraqi Republican Guard at ranges no more than 500 meters. Because the area was saturated with Iraqi armor and troops, the lead elements of TF Panther began to empty their ready racks. Then, as if the heavens opened up and the angel of death appeared, A-10 Thunderbolt II aircraft swooped down on the Iraqi tanks that were as close as 250 meters from the flanks of TF Panther.

The Iraqi vehicles were too close to friendly forces for the A-10 pilots to destroy them with their Maverick antiarmor missiles, so they engaged every target with powerful 30mm cannons as close as 100 meters from the ground. Their daring and amazing bravery at this crucial point in the battle allowed the armored column to transfer ammunition so the task force could continue the attack to the next checkpoint. Iraqi mechanized infantry began to make their presence known to the American armored column. Rocket-propelled grenades (RPG-7) and small-arms fire began peppering the vehicles in the column. To a tank or Bradley, this is harassing fire, but to the high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) and cargo trucks in the column, a direct hit would prove fatal.

Fire Distribution and Control

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dio net because it serves a very important purpose. After someone gives the warning of an enemy in the area, the enemy's location and disposition is then broadcasted over the radio net. By sending these reports through radio channels, it allows the commander to decide where he wants his unit to fire and how much ammunition will be used to destroy the enemy. By controlling the direct fire of a small unit, such as a tank company, a tank company commander can mass his available fire to theoretically destroy an enemy three times his size.

We continued our attack to the northwest side of Baghdad using Highway 1. As we approached Objective Montgomery, enemy ammunition, tool, and supply trucks were lined up on both sides of the road. The tree lines on the sides of the road were filled with enemy tanks, BMPs, MTLBs, ZSUs, and large surface-to-surface and surface-to-air missiles. Extreme discipline and care had to be exercised when engaging the vehicles. We wanted to engage enemy soldiers and disable vehicles, but did not want to blow up the fully stocked ammo trucks. It took precision shooting from our well-trained vehicle commanders and gunners to accomplish the mission. Once we arrived at Montgomery, we assumed the contact would lighten. We had no idea things were about to get worse.

On establishing our hasty battle positions, enemy troops began a counterattack, and once again, the fight was on. In the defense, the Panther rules of combat proved to be more crucial than in the of-

fense. When the TF was on the offense, the Panther rules of combat allowed us to move friendly units, strike the enemy, and protect soldiers traveling in lightly armored vehicles. In the defense, if the Panther rules of combat were not adhered to, the TF would have never seen the enemy until they attacked and would have ran out of ammunition before we could have effectively engaged the enemy. Enemy counterattacks that occurred while at Objective Montgomery that came from our flanks and from across the bridge, were successfully repulsed because they never mastered TF Panther's rules of combat.

In all, TF Panther traveled more than 80 kilometers, the majority under intense enemy fire, for more than 60 continuous hours. Throughout the battle, the repeating cycle of the Panther rules of combat gave the TF the upper hand against larger numbers of Iraqi forces in an urban environment. This battle, along with the four other major battles that TF Panther spearheaded, gave truth to the courage of the soldiers assigned to this unit and others like it.



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